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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 000719

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PASS TO USTR FOR CUTLER, BRIAN AND YOO

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SUBJECT: APRIL 9 ROK NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS: GNP EKES OUT MAJORITY; PARK GEUN-HYE PROVES HER POWER

Classified By: POL Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: With 97 percent of votes counted, Lee Myung-bak's Grand National Party (GNP) won 151 of 299 seats, giving them a much slimmer majority than expected. The opposition United Democratic Party (UDP) did better than anticipated, winning 82 seats. Lee Hoi-chang's Liberal Forward Party (LFP) with 19 seats and the Pro-Park Alliance with 14 were the real surprises, confirming Lee Hoi-chang's regional base in Choongcheong Provinces and Park's appeal in the Yeongnam region. A record 25 independents won; 15 of these are former GNP lawmakers. The elections were marked by record-low turnout (46 percent) as party infighting and a short campaign season left most voters apathetic and unmotivated to vote. END SUMMARY

Key Races

¶2. (SBU) With a GNP majority, President Lee and the GNP received a mandate, albeit a weak one, to carry out his policy reforms, but not all his key supporters were elected. Lee Jae-o, considered Lee's closest ally in the Assembly, lost to Renewal of Korea candidate Moon Kuk-hyun, who ran on an anti-canal platform. Lee Bang-ho, another key Lee aide, lost a shocker to Democratic Labor Party (DLP) candidate Kang Ki-gap. Most observers attribute these losses to the animus the Lees created during the tumultuous nomination process, especially in their attempts to marginalize Park Geun-hye and her faction.

¶3. (SBU) Park Jin, who served as Lee Myung-bak's main foreign policy advisor during the transition period, won a convincing victory over UDP Chairman Sohn Hak-kyu. UDP Presidential candidate Chung Dong-young's attempt to rejoin the assembly was trumped by Chung Mong-joon, who trounced Chung Dong-young by a huge margin. In another high-profile race, former Korea Herald President Hong Jong-wook pulled out a victory over popular New Progressive Party (NPP) candidate Roh Hoi-chan in a working-class district in northern Seoul.

What it all Means

¶4. (C) The victory means controversial bills related to the U.S. -- FTA, Iraq and Afghanistan deployment, etc -- should find the path to approval less treacherous than during the current assembly. Nevertheless, President Lee still needs the support of Park Geun-hye and her supporters, a reality which will require the two political rivals to work together in order to get GNP-backed legislation passed. Despite the parliamentary majority, President Lee will still have a long road ahead of him to build public support for controversial projects like the grand canal.

¶5. (C) President Lee Myung-bak has won the seats he felt he needed -- key advisors told us that a majority was all that was necessary -- and now the hard work begins. Not only does Lee need to use every ounce of political capital he earned with this victory to push through his planned reforms and controversial projects, he must also contend with Park Geun-hye. Lee tried to "kill" Park by eliminating many of her supporters from the Assembly. However, it appears Park has emerged stronger; many pick Park as the most likely candidate to win the Blue House in 2012.

Comment

¶6. (C) The political landscape has changed -- there is a conservative majority in the Assembly, a pro-U.S. president in the Blue House and key positions in the government belong to those sympathetic to the ruling party. This should mean that Lee has free rein to reshape Korea in his image. Perhaps. Korea is a consensus society, but with a population quite divided. For now, a vocal segment of Koreans do not

believe Lee represents their interests and some of these are within Lee's own party. They are unafraid of protracted and violent demonstrations; they certainly won't roll over and accept everything Lee has to offer. Lee must, therefore, do a better job of convincing his current and former party members as well as the public to share his vision, which means he must make some significant adjustments himself.

VERSHBOW